

# How the US wants to modernize its imperialism

America's money dominates world markets for commodities and capital. America's cyber industries dominate global communications. America's navy controls the world's oceans. America's strategic weapons can demolish any enemy's strategic potential as needed. The USA is on its way to making sure Russia is ostracized around the world and its power destroyed. It is countering China's efforts to revise the prevailing world order by declaring a cold war of good guys — democracies — against bad guys — autocrats.

So what's missing?

From the Americans' point of view: an absolute guarantee of future success. The USA will not accept that such a thing may be impossible to have in a world of competing sovereigns. It knows how to get it: *by demanding it of itself*.

Specifics were provided by the government's National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan, in a speech last September.<sup>[\*]</sup>

## I.

Sullivan begins his remarks by looking back:

*"A little over a year ago ... I had the opportunity to share a few thoughts on the digital revolution. I argued that after the liberalizing wave of innovations of the early internet era and after the authoritarian counter-revolution of the 2000s, when our competitors and adversaries took advantage of our complacency and inherent openness we must usher in a "third wave" of the digital revolution — to ensure that emerging technologies work for, not against, our democracies and security. I don't need to tell you that advancements in science and technology are poised to define the geopolitical landscape of the 21st century."*

He tells them anyway. Maybe because it's actually not that obvious, not even for Americans, to immediately associate technological progress with rivalry between major powers. Just as it is not that obvious to equate this rivalry with a struggle between *value* systems, a good one and an evil one, as he does. And does everyone really think of the same thing as Sullivan when he describes the recent history of digital technologies as a grown-up fairytale about waves of struggle between freedom and oppression? Still, one aspect of this fairytale — the decisive one — is actually real. The productivity advances of capital that he refers to as "the early internet era," the new dimension of global markets, military innovations, and globally dominant forms of social life, actually have their true significance in the US successfully dominating the globe. That "*liberalizing wave*," i.e., the worldwide linking of everything and everyone that started out in America, was, in its very "*openness*," the model for American dominance over the "one world" of global

capitalism. It was a way of making the rest of the world dependent on American companies — and also accessible to its intelligence services. What a fine revolution.

But then, unfortunately, came the counterrevolution of the authoritarians. Those are the ones who understood the Americans' "*inherent openness*" exactly the way it was always meant, but nevertheless made use of the promised freedom of global competition exactly the way it was offered to them: as the opportunity to use and be used by American money and capital in order to boost themselves. In fact — and this is where it has become problematic, even criminal — they are now so successful at this that they are challenging the *openness* of competition being equivalent to its *already being settled* in favor of America. Which is of course their intention, too. It seems clear that this refusal to accept America's indisputable supremacy violates an American *prerogative*. But it also seems clear that this prerogative has always only been worth as much as the superiority that America must itself make sure it has:

*"We know there is nothing inevitable about maintaining our core strength and comparative advantage in the world. It must be renewed, revitalized, and stewarded. And that is especially true for U.S. technological leadership."*

Or, as Sullivan notes elsewhere in his speech, it's about

*"the enormity of the task we [face] in redesigning the field on which future technology competition [will] play out. And we are facing a competitor that is determined to overtake U.S. technological leadership and willing to devote nearly limitless resources to that goal."*

So America must do better, which means that the world market must too. For the openness and freedom of global competition are only good if and as long as they *guarantee* America's economic leadership. And at the same time, this is something that there is *no guarantee* for — which Sullivan expresses by assuring his listeners that the US government will by no means make the mistake that a nation of "natural-born" competitors consider a cardinal sin: being complacent about being superior. America knows it must compete in order to regain a superiority that is without competition. It knows its sacred vested *right* to leadership still has to be *fought for*.

Sullivan calls this task "*redesigning*" a "*field*" — a very polite way of referring to what America means by competing for technological leadership.

## II.

To implement the project of repositioning the USA in world-market competition, the Biden administration is starting at home:

*"Under President Biden's leadership, we have built into the foundation of our approach a deep integration of domestic policy and foreign policy ... we are pursuing a modern industrial and innovation strategy to invest in our sources of strength at home, which also powers our strength around the world ... We see four pillars at the heart of our strategy: — First, investing in our science and technology ecosystem; — Second, nurturing top STEM talent; — Third, protecting*

*our technology advantages; — And fourth, deepening and integrating our alliances and partnerships.”*

## **“First, investing in our science and technology ecosystem”**

“Ecosystem” conveys that this area is an overall complex vital to the nation. The totality of institutions and facilities where teaching, research, and development are carried out in the USA, whether in the public or private sector, pursuing whatever objectives, and serving whatever business or political calculations, even competing ones,[\*\*] are supposed to be thought of as a system, an organism that is functional and can be applied for any national purpose. It is supposed to be figuring out all kinds of useful things and making its findings available to the government. Sullivan has a few ideas about which technologies will be the ones deciding *future* competition and so requiring special promotion now:

*“Fundamentally, we believe that a select few technologies are set to play an outsized importance over the coming decade. Computing-related technologies ... Biotechnologies ... clean energy technologies ...”*

It is practically self-evident why and in what way:

*“Computing related technologies ...,” etc., “are new sources of economic growth ... driving advanced military modernization efforts.” “Biotechnologies ...,” etc., make “biology programmable” and are good “for breakthroughs in everything from drug discovery to chemical and material manufacturing.” “The global transition to clean energy ... will also be a major source of economic and jobs growth” and “ensure long-term U.S. energy independence and energy security.”*

This is not thinking merely in capitalistic terms, following the equation that use-values exist for growth. It is thinking in terms of world domination, in a multiple sense. Business and the use of force are quantities to be calculated, their success is based on algorithms, and whoever is perfect at developing and mastering them is basically unbeatable. By technologically mastering biology one can subject the entire power of organic nature to the interest in exploiting it comprehensively and completely — in a “programmable” way. And indigenous industrial production of energy in America coincides with the whole world going along with it. Sullivan sees the purpose of such investments not in private profit, but in benefit for the nation. And that does not mean they will end up giving the country and its leadership all kinds of fine gains in power and wealth. It is the other way round, they involve a challenge that actually confronts America’s world power with a factual constraint:

*“But computing-related technologies, biotech, and clean tech are truly “force multipliers” throughout the tech ecosystem. And leadership in each of these is a national security imperative.”*

America’s existence as a secure power — according to the expert — is crucially dependent on its having exclusive power to control the ecosystemic sources of all capabilities and material resources that might ever be means of rule; it must control the conditions that make successful power possible. And because the required success lies

by definition in the future, America must be one step ahead of the future and lay down what will be decisive.

How to do that? The USA is certainly not lacking in material means of success. According to Sullivan, it is in the fortunate position of being able to solve the security problem at hand by decree. By way of example:

*"The EO [executive order] on Biotech and Biomanufacturing ensures that we not only design the next generation of medicines, materials, and fuels here, but also make them here. From lab to fab, as they say."*

Money is not an issue — it is there. It just has to be put to use. That will automatically ensure the jump from exclusive expertise to a monopoly on fabrication.

A model to follow is Biden's CHIPS Act, restoring American leadership in an industry the nation negligently lost grip of:

*"The CHIPS Act invests \$52 billion to restore U.S. leadership in semiconductor manufacturing and R&D and reduce our overreliance on foreign-produced chips. It is an investment larger than the real cost of the Manhattan Project."*

Not everyone would think of making a comparison with the cost of developing the atomic bomb in World War II. But this comes easily to a security advisor who is already surveying the world to see how America can monopolize the power to control the means of using force unbeatably now and in the future. He no longer sees any difference: between his nation's civilian superiority and its military superiority; between aiming to subjugate the world of states to the US regime, and actually doing it; or, in the end, between its rival China and the Japanese empire, between Taiwan and Pearl Harbor.

This does not make him forget civilian capitalistic business life — after all, the whole thing has to *pay off* at the same time too. That goes without saying for a good American. So capital is assigned its function within the national security program; more as a helper in raising money, however, and as a profiteer only after that:

*"With each of these investments, our goal is to 'crowd in' private capital, not replace it, and to attract 'patient capital' to bring critical technologies to scale. Particularly for next-generation energy technologies ... a proactive investment strategy now may save us billions of dollars later."*

In the long run, putting private wealth to use for America's world domination will inevitably pay off for all sides.

## **“Second, nurturing top STEM talent”**

*"The second pillar is developing, attracting, and retaining top talent. The easiest way we can achieve this goal is ensuring the United States remains the preferred destination for all premier STEM talent around the globe."*

When it comes to the quite extensive personnel needed for his large-scale project of strategic innovation, Biden's security advisor again takes the standpoint of *laying hold* of them. He can constructively build on the standpoint the USA has always taken in such matters: whatever bright minds there might be anywhere in the world who could be useful in making the most advanced technologies emerge from the American ecosystem

— they belong in America, where else? “*Investing in our domestic research and education pipelines*” is underway anyway; but there is also a huge reservoir of already educated talent abroad that America could make good use of. So how convenient that the inferior countries that have had these young professionals educated for their own national purposes and calculations can’t offer them, after they graduate, the financial and career prospects that America can. America’s laying hold of these bright minds presents itself as an offer; and the US can simply save itself the expense of educating them. When it comes to the global labor market for “*top talent*,” America can’t go wrong exploiting the freedom of cross-border migration; all it has to do is lower the barriers a bit for such figures to enter the promised land, i.e., ensure they can “*come and stay in the United States*.” A few legal regulations just need to be changed to get the “brain drain” going:

*“We also issued new guidance eliminating the need to have a sponsoring U.S. employer for highly accomplished individuals with an advanced degree in a STEM field that is critical to U.S. national security. Such individuals can now apply for a National Interest Waiver ...”*

Hard to imagine nicer life prospects for the world’s youth than to use their heads to benefit the superpower’s national security.

### **“Third, protecting our technological advantages”**

Monopolizing decisive technological developments in the USA is by no means all there is to the ambitious project of restoring American leadership in the field of technology. Competitors and enemies of the USA leave no stone unturned to take what isn’t theirs; this has to be prevented. The various changes that requires are what the “third pillar” is about:

*“The third pillar is protecting our technology advantages, and preventing our competitors from stealing America’s intellectual property, and using our technologies against us or their own people. ... On export controls, we have to revisit the longstanding premise of maintaining “relative” advantages over competitors in certain key technologies. We previously maintained a “sliding scale” approach that said we need to stay only a couple of generations ahead. That is not the strategic environment we are in today. Given the foundational nature of certain technologies, such as advanced logic and memory chips, we must maintain as large of a lead as possible. Earlier this year, the United States and our allies and partners levied on Russia the most stringent technology restrictions ever imposed on a major economy. These measures have inflicted tremendous costs [meaning: on Russia] ... This has demonstrated that technology export controls can be more than just a preventative tool. If implemented in a way that is robust, durable, and comprehensive, they can be a new strategic asset in the U.S. and allied toolkit to impose costs on adversaries, and even over time degrade their battlefield capabilities.”*

This makes it pretty clear what the purpose of American leadership in technology is. Having a lead means being superior, and the purpose of that is not only to stay ahead of enemies, not even *only “a couple of generations,”* but to exclude them from the global level of “knowledge is power” that America defines and implements and that is crucial in the world of business and force. It goes without saying that other nations can’t hold a candle to the USA in this respect.

The only question is how to protect such an unassailable lead, when it’s practically already in the bag, from being taken by others. The problem is that research findings, because they are knowledge, are by nature universal and available to the whole world as theory; first they have to be *made* inaccessible. It is a mere first step to declare them *“America’s intellectual property,”* making their unauthorized use *theft* that the world power’s globally operating jurisdiction will make sure is punished. Certainly, Sullivan also recommends giving the *“US Patent and Trademark Office”* new tasks and powers that will be useful to private monopolists. But more than that is needed for effective *national* anti-theft protection. Part of the problem, but also a starting point for solving it, is the fact that technological progress circulates in cyberspace and is objectified in technical equipment which, in capitalism, happens to exist as a commodity that basically anyone can buy, according to the old, *“longstanding”* world-market rules that now need revisiting. But the digital sphere where knowledge exists, as well as trade in advanced commodities, can and must be *controlled* by a world power; and such controls *“can be a new strategic asset in the US and allied toolkit ... if implemented in a way that is robust, durable, and comprehensive.”* His *“can”* is a *“must”*; and the *“way”* he refers to means something very fundamental. The rigidly enforced restrictions on world trade in *“sensitive”* commodities are no longer to be exceptions to the rule of free enrichment through foreign markets and others’ products. It is necessary to enforce, conversely, a general clause excluding disagreeable competitors from acquiring such goods. And this must apply not only to the finished products, but especially to the ability to make them, which in capitalism is also — *merely* — a question of money:

*“The Administration also has taken a series of steps to modernize our investment screening systems. Just yesterday, President Biden issued an Executive Order providing the first formal Presidential guidance to CFIUS in the history of the Committee. The order puts us back ahead of the game.”*

The *“Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States,”* already set up at the onset of the Cold War, now gets to support and help organize a historic advance in the great *“game”* to dominate the world. It is now strategically necessary for America’s miracle weapon for dominating global capitalism, the freedom of international capital movements back and forth across US borders, to be developed further to shield the US *“against evolving risks ... in connection with countries of concern.”* This includes, for example, deciding *“whether a transaction impacts US leadership in technologies relevant to national security”* — and when could that ever be ruled out?! This puts an end to the principle that capitalistic business in US dollars cannot be wrong, or only in

exceptional cases, and that US companies can and should make and take whatever investments are profitable for them. Instead, they are being protected “*from predatory foreign investments*,” whether they like it or not. “*Outbound investments in sensitive technologies*” are subject to a restrictive “*approach*” even if they would not be “*captured by export controls*.” The example to follow is the “*robust guardrails*” of the new CHIPS Act “*that prevent companies that receive taxpayer money from turning around and making investments in China [!] that undermine our national security*.” Which once again says quite bluntly what the new “*strategic environment*” for America’s inquiring minds and progress is all about.

The government is of course aware that these new business conditions it is decreeing will disrupt or even ruin many a capitalist’s calculation. However, it can’t make itself dependent on whether they agree:

*“We fully intend for industry to have an opportunity to provide input at the right time and intend to proceed in a way that is clear for stakeholders and tailored to our national security concerns.”*

Or, as Sullivan puts it so nicely:

*“Preserving our edge in science and technology is not a ‘domestic issue’ or ‘national security’ issue. It’s both.”*

## **“Fourth, deepening and integrating our alliances and partnerships”**

Finally, Sullivan enlightens his audience on the role the Biden administration has planned for its “allies and partners” in and for realigning the world market with America’s strategic interests. This is not an open question, but rather has already been answered in a certain sense by their being declared the fourth pillar of America’s project. They are intended to act as its key supporters — what else is a pillar supposed to do?

Sure, *objectively* speaking, this ascertainment is an admission that the USA *needs* the other global economic powers to cooperate for implementing its program. Degrading China to an inferior power, irreversibly weakening Russia as a military power through economic warfare — even the mighty USA can’t manage this alone. Such goals can only be reached if the other global economic powers act concordantly. America’s export controls will only have a real impact if the other powerful players on the world market follow suit. America’s strategic blackmail will only become impossible to get around if the USA succeeds in rallying its major competitors behind it. And so on. The global *monopoly* the USA wants to secure for itself on completely controlling the distribution and use of all decisive economic and state-maintaining means will only work if it is supported by powerful allies.

However, what Sullivan *means* by calling the alliances a “pillar” of the American project is somewhat different. From his point of view, the current administration deserves a seal of approval for including America’s “partners” in its project *at all*. This should be appreciated as a “*true hallmark of the Biden Administration*” (especially in

comparison with the misguided approach of the previous one); and this is again a very American way of thinking. There is clearly *only one player* in charge of reorganizing relations and that is the USA. And that fact remains when the superpower — represented by its security adviser — turns to the issue of how *it* can use its allies *for its project*. So they are accordingly introduced as sidekicks for *carrying out* what the USA has decided to do on the basis of *its* interests and necessities. They are the *fourth pillar*, i.e., it has already been established *what* has to be done. This reads as follows:

*“From transforming the G7 into a steering committee of the free world on issues like sanctions and energy security to launching an innovative and far-reaching security partnership ... called AUKUS we are deepening our unrivaled network of alliances and partnerships and driving a strategic alignment across the Atlantic and the Pacific.”*

There is no question who is doing the “transforming” and who has to get transformed. From the US point of view at least, this is a great idea. If the major economic powers are already meeting in the G7, then they might as well start acting as a kind of globally responsible transmission belt for decisions and measures in and against the rest of the world. The USA will tell them in good time which decisions those are.

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This is the “strategic” view that the American President’s security advisor takes when looking at the USA’s established relations with other powers. If the power leading the free world decides to change its strategy, then these relations give it equally many levers for utilizing its friends who subscribe to the *American way of life* for its project:

*“We are also ... linking all of our efforts with like-minded economies into an integrated strategy built on the premise that we are stronger when we leverage the capabilities and common purpose of friends and allies.”*

It’s that simple. In view of the fact that the major “economies” *are* already “like-minded,” nothing stands in the way of their being commissioned by America, their being “integrated” into an overall strategy with a clear relationship between who’s in charge and who’s being used. This is how the leading power wants a new America-serving *regime* over the world of states to inevitably emerge. Its supporters’ services that it threw away under Biden’s predecessor are being restored. To Sullivan, the US is on the right track:

*“Almost two years into the Biden Administration, we have reinforced the foundations on which American power and influence sit.”*

## Note

[\*] All quotes from: Remarks by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan at the Special Competitive Studies Project Global Emerging Technologies Summit ([www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov), September 16, 2022)

[\*\*] So the government’s new research-funding program also sends a message to the community involved. Up to now researchers have by no means viewed themselves as

members of a national system acting in concert. On the contrary, they are constantly fighting tooth and nail for government grants, reflecting quite accurately the rifts in public policy, for example energy policy and the “Green New Deal.”

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